

MARRIAGE COUNSELING:
DEFINITIONS AND CORRELATES OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE

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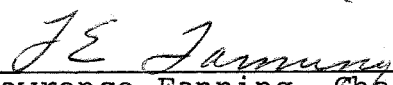
by
Kenneth E. Miller
February 1986

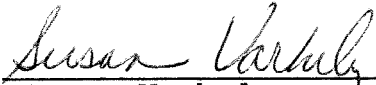
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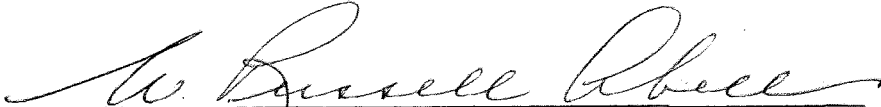
MARRIAGE COUNSELING:
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An abstract of a Field Report by
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February 1986
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The problem. The author sought to analytically describe definitions of success and failure in marriage counseling held by those in the private practice of marriage counseling. Additionally, the author attempted to have practitioners identify client characteristics they believed to be associated with success and failure in marriage counseling.

Procedure. Twenty-seven randomly selected private-practice marriage counselors were interviewed by the author. The data obtained from the interviews were supplemented with data obtained from journals and monographs.

Findings. Two discrete definitions of success and failure were held by the marriage counselors who were interviewed. One definition focused on whether or not the presenting and/or subsequently delineated marital problems are ameliorated. The other definition focused on whether or not the clients are able to release or acquire certain interpersonal and intrapersonal attributes and skills. Among the correlates of success and failure in the counseling experience identified by the practitioners were clarity and individuation of self, empathy, acceptance of social and psychological differences between self and marital partner, education, intelligence, support systems, third-party involvement, psychopathologies, level of pain and motivation, narcissism, value systems, and degree of marital homogeneity.

Conclusions. There is among professional marriage counselors significant agreement on definitions of success and failure in the marital counseling experience. Likewise, there is significant agreement concerning the correlates of success and failure.

Recommendations. Research should be conducted among those who have experienced marital counseling to determine how clients define success and failure and to determine the degree to which client and practitioner definitions are congruent. Attempts should be made to determine what client characteristics are, in fact, correlated with client-perceived success and failure in the counseling experience.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Research Problem

For at least the past 130 years the marriage rate in the United States has remained very high and very stable. "In fact, more than ninety percent of the members of every birth cohort on record (records extend back to the mid-1800s) have eventually married."¹ In his recently published study of the marriage, divorce, and remarriage histories of three important four-year cohort groups (those born early in the present century, 1910-1914, their children born during the depression, 1930-1934, and their children born during the post-war baby boom, 1950-1954), Andrew Cherlin documents that marriage rates averaged 95 percent and ranged from 94 to 96 percent.²

The American divorce and remarriage rates have not, however, remained stable. Those rates have escalated dramatically during the past forty years. For the three cohort groups studied by Cherlin, the divorce rates for first marriages have been 15.8, 26.0, and 47.4 percent respectively.³

¹Andrew J. Cherlin, Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), p. 9.

²Ibid., pp. 69-70.

³Ibid., p. 122.

The remarriage rates for the three cohorts have been 12.0, 20.1, and 33.5 percent respectively.¹

Approximately 80 percent of those currently obtaining divorces will eventually remarry² and approximately 50 percent of those remarriages will take place within three years of the divorce.³ Almost 83 percent of all divorced men and 75 percent of all divorced women eventually remarry⁴ and such remarriages "represent 32 percent of all marriages in the United States."⁵

The continuing high marriage and remarriage rates and public opinion surveys indicate that Americans have not lost confidence in marriage per se as a social arrangement. But clearly almost one-half of all contemporary first marriages are ending in divorce and many that do not are thought to be unsatisfactory to one or both partners. If re-divorces are counted, America currently experiences approximately fifty-five divorces for every one hundred marriages each year.

Clearly, marital distress and divorce, its contemporary concomitant, are widespread in America. The social and psy-

¹Cherlin, p. 122.

²Ann Goetting, "The Six Stations of Remarriage: Developmental Tasks of Remarriage After Divorce," Family Relations, 31, No. 2 (1982), 213.

³Cherlin, p. 29.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Goetting, p. 213.

chological consequences of such high rates of marital distress and divorce are not yet understood clearly. It is known, however, that currently at least 22 percent of all children under eighteen years of age live with one parent only, an increase from 12 percent in 1970. Current projections indicate that at least 50 percent "of those people born during the 1970s will live at least some portion of their childhood in a one parent household." The divorce experience is thought to impact significantly on virtually every area of social life in America.¹

When their marital satisfaction declines or the continuation of the marriage itself becomes problematic, some individuals and couples seek assistance from someone in the "helping professions." Those in the helping professions who attempt to be of assistance to maritally distressed individuals and couples are called marriage counselors or marriage therapists.

According to Robert F. Stahmann, "therapy" is a term associated with a medical model, a model based on the assumption that a distressed marriage is associated with some form of individual or couple pathology. "Counseling," on the other hand, is meant to indicate "growth and development

¹Eleanor Lyon, et al., "Stages of Divorce: Implications for Service Delivery," Social Casework, 66, No. 5 (1985), 259.

apart from the implication of pathological illness."¹ In spite of the fact that most marriage counselors use a counseling theory and counseling techniques based on a growth and development rather than a pathology model, the major professional organizations for marriage counselors are the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and the American Family Therapy Association.

The primary focus of marriage counseling is on interpersonal relationships, the circular interaction between two role partners. The focus of individual counseling, which is sometimes a concomitant of marriage counseling, is on the intrapersonal (intrapsychic) "forces within the individual partners."²

Counseling, whether of individuals, couples, or groups (as in family counseling), is more of an art than it is a science. Even so, counseling is not without a scientific foundation.³ Although they may vary in their handling of different types of clients, counselors will invariably oper-

¹Robert F. Stahmann, "Treatment Forms for Marital and Sex Counseling," in Counseling in Marital and Sexual Problems, 3rd. ed., ed. Robert F. Stahmann and William J. Hiebert (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1984), p. 1.

²Hilda M. Goodwin and Emily H. Mudd, "Marriage Counseling: Methods and Goals," in Handbook of Marriage Counseling, ed. Ben N. Ard, Jr. and Constance C. Ard (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1969), p. 96.

³Paul Popenoe, "The Writings of Dr. Popenoe," Family Life, 39, No. 5 (1979), 12-13. The entire issue is devoted to a selected review of the writings of Paul Popenoe, a pioneer in the field of marriage and family counseling.

ate within one or more theoretical approaches that may be classified as psychology or sociology.¹

counseling...is regarded as a learned art in which a professionally trained person has acquired certain basic knowledges, attitudes, and skills and has integrated these into a disciplined capacity to use himself therapeutically with individuals or couples seeking help with intrapersonal or interpersonal problems of adjustment. The basic knowledge would include an understanding of physiological and personality growth, of psychodynamic theory, of cultural and ethnic factors as they affect the unique marital partners, of role interaction, of relationship theory, and of counseling skills and process. An understanding of the many facets in marriage - including the affectional, sexual, economic, ethical, and religious - is important.²

Marriage counselors help "to modify the maladaptive or maladjustive relationships of married couples. The marriage counselor...serves as a counselor-consultant to the marriage relationship, not to one spouse or the other."³

Counselors are in the business of helping clients change their relationships and their self-concepts.⁴ Clients are "bio-psycho-social" organisms attempting to adapt to an environmental situation who bring a self-concept and a set of problems to the counseling relationship.⁵ The clients "and

¹R. Lofton Hudson, Marital Counseling (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 25.

²Goodwin and Mudd, pp. 95-96.

³Stahmann, p. 1.

⁴Arthur W. Combs, Donald L. Avila, and William W. Purkey, Helping Relationships (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978), p. 28.

⁵Dean Johnson, Marriage Counseling: Theory and Practice (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 21.

the marriage counselor share in facilitating a better understanding of self, of the mate, and of the relationship."¹

The basic goal in marriage counseling is, therefore, not to effect any drastic change in the personality structure of either partner, but to help each perceive his own reality, the reality of the partner, and that of the marriage more clearly. Where possible, counseling would assist each spouse to shift in his demands and patterns of relating sufficiently so that each may achieve at least minimal satisfaction and rewards within their particular marriage. In some instances, counseling may help the couple clarify their inability to effect a satisfactory adjustment in this marriage, and a decision to seek psychiatric help for basically crippling personality characteristics may be made and a referral effected for one or both partners. In certain instances a decision to terminate the marriage may be constructive and may be the final choice of one or both partners.²

Most marriage counseling is based on the assumption that marriage is a voluntaristic social relationship that is primarily bonded by affective rather than instrumental considerations. The notion that the nature of marriage and family in "modern" societies has shifted from being primarily instrumental (goal-oriented) to affective (process-oriented) was developed at some length by sociologists Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales.³

Most contemporary writers and practitioners in the field of marriage and family counseling accept the notion, developed

¹Aaron L. Rutledge, "The Future of Marriage Counseling," in Ard, Jr., and Ard, p. 5.

²Goodwin and Mudd, p. 97.

³Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, Family, Socialization, and Interaction Process (New York: Free Press, 1955).

by Parsons and Bales, that, while differences exist by social class,¹ there are very few instrumental ties that now bind men and women together in marriage and family relationships. They believe that emotional or affective ties are the primary bases for the establishment and continuation of intimate, interpersonal relationships between men and women. Thus, "husbands and wives are more likely today than in the past to evaluate their marriage primarily according to how well it satisfies their individual needs."² If such individual emotional needs, for one or both partners, are not met at an acceptable level they "are likely to turn to divorce and then, perhaps, to another marriage."³

Gail Fullerton, in her manual for marital survival, argues that marriage can be conceptualized as an economic union, a procreating union, and as a search for intimacy. She asserts, however, that in America the primary function of the marriage relationship "is to provide the continuity and intimacy that neither men nor women are likely to find in any other relationship."⁴ She further asserts that because "marriage is now more a matter of emotional than economic

¹Barbara Thornes and Jean Collard, Who Divorces? (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

²Cherlin, p. 75.

³Ibid.

⁴Gail P. Fullerton, Survival in Marriage, 2nd. ed. (Hinsdale, Ill.: The Dryden Press, 1977), p. 60. Emphasis in the original.

necessity, we regard as a failure any marriage that is not marked by a high degree of intimacy and emotional commitment."¹

Fullerton and many others believe that separation, divorce, or continuing to live together in an unfulfilling relationship are not the only alternatives available to those couples whose relationships are not characterized by the "intimacy and emotional commitment" that they seek. Many such couples can turn and are turning to marriage counselors in an attempt to find intimacy and commitment and save their troubled relationships.

"In the last few decades marital-family therapy has become an accepted method of treatment for a variety of mental health problems."² And many mental health problems, an estimated 60 percent, have their etiologies in distressed marital or family relationships.³

In the past, people with emotional or mental health problems, regardless of the etiology of the problem, were treated, if they were in fact treated, individually by classically trained psychologists, psychiatrists, or psychoana-

¹Fullerton, p. 60.

²Alan S. Furman and David P. Kniskern, "Research on Marital and Family Therapy: Progress, Perspective, and Prospect," in Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change, 2nd. ed., ed. Sol L. Garfield and Allen E. Bergin (New York: Wiley, 1978), p. 817.

³Ibid., p. 819.

lysts. Subsequently, starting in the 1920s but especially since the 1960s, psychotherapists of various kinds began to treat couples and then began to treat entire family units.¹ Starting in the late 1960s, "marital and family therapy has emerged as a significant and separate mental health field..."² As the public has become aware of the existence and value of marital and family therapy "they are requesting, even demanding, relationship-oriented treatment."³

The mushrooming interest in marital and family therapy is reflected in a variety of indicators. First, there have been over 1,500 articles and 200 books on marital and family therapy published between 1970-1979. The number of journals on this topic has increased from two in the early 1970s to more than ten in 1979. The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) increased its membership from about 1,000 in 1970 to almost 8,000 in 1980. Also, a second organization was formed called the American Family Therapy Association.⁴

During the first half of the decade of the 1980s the field of marital and family counseling has continued to mushroom. In 1984 there were approximately twelve thousand clinical members of the American Association of Marriage and

¹William C. Nichols, "Education of Marriage and Family Therapists: Some Trends and Implications," Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 5, No. 1 (1979), 19.

²David H. Olson, Candyce S. Russell, and Douglas H. Sprenkle, "Marital and Family Therapy: A Decade Review," Journal of Marriage and the Family, 42, No. 4 (1980), 973.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

Family Therapy.¹ The growth in the number of those who publicly and professionally identify themselves as marriage and/or family counselors manifests itself at the community level all over America. As of late 1984, for example, there were sixty-one individuals listed as being in the private practice of marriage and/or family counseling compared to two persons so listed in 1964 in the City of Des Moines, Iowa, the site of the research reported herein.²

The majority of those who seek and participate in marital counseling seem to benefit from the experience. Stahmann reports that the estimated improvement rate for those who have participated in marriage counseling is approximately 64 percent. The estimated spontaneous improvement rate (improvement without intervention) for those with marital problems is estimated to be only 17 percent. Comparatively, the improvement rate for those who have participated in individual psychotherapy is estimated to be also 64 percent, but the spontaneous improvement rate is estimated to be 43 percent.³

Increasingly there is a need for and an interest in marriage and family counseling. It is a field that is matur-

¹Stahmann and Hiebert, p. v.

²The 1964 data are from J. A. Morris Kimber, "Psychologists and Marriage Counselors in the United States" in Ard, Jr., and Ard. The 1984 data are from the telephone book for metropolitan Des Moines, Iowa.

³Stahmann, p. 10.

ing and becoming increasingly visible. As such, it is now becoming the focus of research intended to describe, analyze, and evaluate its theoretical foundations, its methodologies, its consequences, its practitioners, and its clients.

The research project which is the basis for this report was intended to be exploratory and selective rather than definitive and comprehensive. It was not designed to test discrete hypotheses. It was the first phase of a more comprehensive research project planned by the author.

The primary foci of this phase of the research project were: (1) to describe analytically the definitions or models of success and failure of the marriage counseling experience held and used by those primarily in the private, vis a vis agency, practice of marriage (couple vis a vis individual or family) counseling; and (2) to describe analytically those client characteristics that marriage counselors believe to be associated with the likelihood of success and failure of the marriage counseling experience.

Subsequent phases of the research will focus primarily on (1) determining how clients define success and failure of the marriage counseling experience, (2) identifying client characteristics which seem to be associated with client-perceived success and failure of the marriage counseling

experience, and (3) describing how clients came to be involved in the marriage counseling experience with private practitioners.¹

¹Very few of those who should or might become marriage counseling clients do so. It is important, therefore, from a practical as well as a theoretical perspective to try to understand why and how maritally distressed persons become clients. See, for example, Julia M. Brannen, "Seeking Help for Marital Problems: A Conceptual Approach," British Journal of Social Work, 10, No. 4 (1980), 457-70.

CHAPTER TWO

Research Methodology

The data for the study were derived from two sources. One source was library materials available at two major universities. Fifteen sociology and counseling journals were searched for articles relevant to definitions of success and failure of the marriage counseling experience and client characteristics apparently associated with success and failure of the counseling experience.

In most cases, journals were searched starting with the most recent issue available to nine years into the past. The names of possibly relevant books were acquired from bibliographic citations contained in journal articles, books, and from entries in university library card catalogs under such headings as "marriage counseling," "marriage and family," "divorce," and related topics.

A second source of data was from interviews conducted by the author with a sample of private-practice marriage counselors in the Des Moines, Iowa metropolitan area. The sample selected for interviewing consisted of a randomly selected group of thirty-one of the sixty-one persons listed in the Des Moines metropolitan telephone directory as being in the private practice of marriage counseling.

A letter from the author was sent to each of the thirty-one persons selected to be in the sample. The letter to each prospective interviewee, though a xerox copy of an original, was individually addressed and was signed by the author.¹

Starting approximately one week after the letters were mailed, the author called each of the persons who were sent letters to request that person's participation in the research project. In each case the author offered to answer any questions the prospective interviewee had and also offered to conduct the interview in their office and at their convenience. The author also stated that all interview content would be treated with strict confidentiality and that any subsequent reports or articles for publication would report information in such a manner as to insure the confidentiality of respondents.

One of the thirty-one persons who received the letter turned out not to do marriage counseling. Three others declined to participate in the research project. Interviews, each lasting approximately one-half of an hour, were conducted with the remaining twenty-seven persons. All interviews, except one, were conducted in the offices of the participating marriage counselors.

In conducting the interviews, the author was guided by the interview schedule reproduced as Appendix B. In most

¹The letter is reproduced as Appendix A.

cases the order of the questions asked of the respondent was the same, but occasionally the response of the person being interviewed to an early question dictated a variation from the usual order of questions. The author knows of no reasons why such variations might have influenced either the validity or reliability of the data obtained from the interviews.

Each interviewee was asked, as the interview began, to use his or her private practice of marriage counseling as the empirical referent for answering all questions. Notes were taken during the interview on an interview schedule. Usually within an hour of the completion of an interview, the author used those notes to do a detailed, but not verbatim, writeup of the interview question by question.

Seventy percent of the interviews were written up in less than one hour from the time the interview ended and 82 percent were written up in less than three hours. In no case did more than twenty-four hours elapse between the completion of the interview and the detailed writeup.

Seventeen (63 percent) of the twenty-seven persons in the sample of marriage counselors were male and ten (37 percent) were female. Among the male counselors, 76 percent were full-time private practitioners and among the females, 50 percent were full-time private practitioners. Sixty-seven percent of all of the marriage counselors in the sample were full-time practitioners.

There is no reason to believe that the twenty-seven persons in the sample are not representative of all of the private-practice marriage counselors in the metropolitan area of Des Moines. Likewise, there is no reason to believe that private-practice marriage counselors in Des Moines are significantly different from those in other American cities. It therefore seems reasonable to assert that to the degree, especially, that information obtained from the interviewees is congruent with information obtained from the literature search, the findings of this study are prudently generalizable to marriage counselors and marriage counseling clients in other parts of America.

The data obtained for, and presented in, this report of the research study are primarily qualitative. The counselor definitions of success and failure are the result of an interpretive content analysis of the interview data obtained by the author. Since the author is trained in the marriage counseling field and has recently reviewed a substantial amount of the literature in the field of counseling generally and marriage counseling specifically, the interpretation of the interview data is more likely to follow the real meaning of the data than it is to merely reflect the values, prejudices, or preconceptions of the author.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Findings

Definitions of Success

The goal of marriage counseling, according to R. Lofton Hudson, is to help a distressed couple better "understand how their marriage ran into a roadblock." It is, further, to help the couple find a way around the roadblock so that they may return "to the place where they were enjoying one another." Sometimes the counseling experience will, according to Hudson, lead the couple to understand that "there is no road back. Too many chuck holes have been developed."¹

Hudson's twenty-two year old observation, that couples in counseling may discover that the termination of their marital partnership is their most viable option, was echoed by virtually all of the marriage counselors interviewed by the author. Those counselors did not suggest that divorce is a goal to be sought or that it is a desirable goal. They were suggesting, however, that even if the individuals in a distressed marriage are able to release² or enhance or learn the communication and other interpersonal skills that are

¹Hudson, p. 9.

²The concept of "release" is defined by the author as the process of removing social or psychological impediments so that a latent skill or characteristic may become manifest.

essential to a "healthy" marital relationship, they may be unable to re-establish with their current partner the intimacy that they generally seek in a marital relationship.

They may, as Hudson suggests, have created too many "chuck holes" for lasting repairs to be made. They may, with confidence in and respect for one another, choose to end their current marital relationship. In other words, the counselors interviewed did not feel that a successful counseling experience has occurred only if the marital relationship continues. As one counselor said: "Divorce is not an indicator of failure...nor is depression over a divorce."

On the other hand, most counselors seemed also to be saying that the fact that a couple stays together is not an indicator of the success of the marriage counseling experience. It is possible for a couple to stay together in the same dysfunctional manner that originally led them to the counselor's office.

The author's analysis of the interview materials indicates that there are two general types of counselor definition of success of the marriage counseling experience. One definition or model of success focuses on the client's attainment of relatively discrete goals. This is the model held and presumably used by those counselors who are goal or problem, vis a vis process or skill, oriented.

Those marriage counselors tend to define success in terms of whether or not the clients have attained or believe

they have attained some quite discrete goals that are identified and agreed upon (contracted for) early in the counseling experience. Approximately 30 percent of the counselors interviewed defined success of the marriage counseling experience in those terms.

The remaining 70 percent of those interviewed defined success in terms of releasing or learning and practicing certain interpersonal skills and achieving and recognizing the achievement of intrapersonal integration on the part of the clients. They seem to be saying that interpersonal (e.g., marital) distress is the consequence of not having or not practicing intrapersonal integration and/or an adequate level of such interpersonal skills as communication or conflict management. The experience of marriage counseling, sometimes supplemented by individual counseling, is seen as a vehicle for releasing, enhancing, or learning intrapersonal and interpersonal skills or characteristics.

Process or skill oriented marriage counselors tended to define success in terms of releasing, enhancing, or learning generic-type characteristics or skills. Their definitions of success included such statements as: "If clients feel they have grown; if they feel they know themselves better; if they are better able to communicate with their partner about things they define as significant to the relationship." Another process oriented definition of success of the marriage coun-

seling experience is that "one or both develop the ability to differentiate self from the relationship environment."

Successful clients are also seen by process oriented counselors as those who learn "to stop projecting their unhappiness onto their partner" or as persons "who become capable of defining what they can and cannot control; what they are and are not responsible for." The goal of the process oriented counselor is to facilitate the release or acquisition of skills which can be used to deal with discrete marital problems.

The author could find very few definitions of either success or failure of the marriage counseling experience in the literature. The few that could be found, and most of those were implicit rather than explicit, are process or skill oriented definitions.

One such definition asserts that counselors, marriage counselors included, are "in the business of helping... clients...to explore and discover better, more effective relationship between themselves and the world they live in."¹ Whether or not the marriage counseling experience is successful is measured by the degree to which the counseling experience and the counselor have an effect on the "self-concept" of the clients.² "Today virtually every member of the help-

¹Combs, Avila, and Purkey, p. 28.

²Ibid.

ing professions believes that for a helping relationship to be successful, some change must be brought about in the self-concept or self-esteem of a client..."¹

The concept of "self" seems to play a key role in those few definitions of success in the counseling experience that the author found in the literature. Each client's sense of self (an integrated sense of who he or she is) is seen as often being in need of clarification. Part of that clarification process involves learning to see the self as an identity separate from the marital (or other) relationship environment; that is, the clients must see themselves as separate persons who carry stable, but potentially changeable, identities into a complex set of social relationships.

Self-esteem is the positive, neutral, or negative affect (feelings) that one has toward one's self. Positive self-esteem is clearly to be valued over negative self-esteem.

Finally, the literature suggests, the counselor must help clients achieve self-actualization.² The client who is self-actualized has attained: a more efficient perception and acceptance of reality; spontaneity; detachment; autonomy; independence of the sociocultural environment; development

¹Donald Avila and Arthur W. Combs, eds., Perspectives on Helping Relationships and the Helping Professions (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1985), p. 1.

²Combs, Avila, and Purkey, p. 84.

of an unhostile sense of humor; an openness to experience; and an ability to discriminate between means and ends.¹

The author's content analysis of the responses of the nineteen process oriented marriage counselors indicates that their definitions of success of the marriage counseling experience focus essentially around seven intrapersonal and interpersonal thought and behavioral patterns. The emphasis on "patterns" seems to be reflecting their belief and the belief of some writers in the field that it is crucial for the success of the marriage counseling experience "to focus on the metalevel and avoid getting bogged down in the isolated details."² Dysfunctional patterns of thought and behavior must be identified and either muted or eliminated and more functional patterns substituted for them whenever possible.³

The seven patterns that are central to counselor definitions of success and which presumably guide those counselors in their professional activities are as follows: self, communication, responsibility, change, role clarification, conflict, and forgiveness. Each of these patterns will be briefly explicated and an attempt will be made to indicate the role that each plays with respect to success in the marriage

¹Combs, Avila, and Purkey, p. 84

²Carlfred B. Broderick, The Therapeutic Triangle (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983), p. 93.

³Ibid.

counseling experience and, as appropriate, to success in marriage.

A key ingredient in process oriented counseling seems to be to insure that each client has or develops a relatively clear sense of who he or she is and that each client has or develops a relatively clear and coherent set of values which will be used to guide life choices and behavior. That sense of self and that set of values should be acceptable to the client or attempts to bring about changes in one or both should be a part of the counseling process. The counselors appear to be assuming that one cannot relate to others in a functional way unless one has a clear sense of self, sees that self as discrete (i.e., existing in, but separate from, an interactional and sociocultural environment), and has a positive evaluation of that self.

Virtually every counselor who was interviewed discussed, in one way or another, the critical role that communication with marital and other partners plays in success in marital counseling and in marriage itself.¹ Communication, which involves a sender, receiver, message, and sociocultural context, can be verbal or non-verbal. The inability or refusal to communicate prevents self-disclosure, which seems to be a

¹The literature gives significant attention to the relationship between communication and marital breakdown. See, for example, Alisa Burns, "Perceived Causes of Marriage Breakdown and Conditions of Life," Journal of Marriage and the Family, 46, No. 3 (1984), 551-61.

serious impediment to success in the marriage counseling experience and an impediment to success in the marital relationship.¹

Of all the components believed to contribute to satisfying and stable marital relationships in our society, marital communication stands out as the process underlying and supporting most other, if not all, marital processes and outcomes...

Self-disclosure is one type of marital communication in particular that has been identified as a key factor in the development of fulfilling and stable marital relationships. Self-disclosure is a process by which a marriage partner expresses feelings, perceptions, fears, and doubts of the inner self to the other partner, allowing relatively private and personal information to surface in the relationship that normally would not be revealed in the course of the day-to-day interaction.²

Many marriage counselors find it necessary either to teach some communication skills to clients or to assist clients to remove emotional impediments to communicating with marital partners and marriage counselors. The ability and willingness to communicate is a key to many of the other patterns which are involved in successful marriage counseling experiences and successful marriages.

¹The affect of self-disclosure on marital satisfaction and marital dissolution is explored by Bernard Davidson, Jack Balswick, and Charles Halverson, "Affective Self-disclosure and Marital Adjustment: A Test of Equity Theory," Journal of Marriage and the Family, 45, No. 1 (1983), 93-102.

²Stephen R. Jorgensen and Janis Gaudy, "Self-Disclosure and Satisfaction in Marriage: The Relation Examined," Family Relations, 29, No. 3 (1980), 280-81. The relative importance of communication in different types of marriages (e.g., Instrumental Working Class and Companionable Middle Class) is examined in Barbara Thornes and Jean Collard, Who Divorces?

Most of the counselors who were interviewed stated, in one form or another, that a successful marriage counseling experience required that clients learn to take responsibility for their own lives, their own happiness, and for creating a need-meeting dyadic relationship. Many clients, they asserted, have a tendency to attribute their own failure to be happy and fulfilled to others in their interactional environment, especially their marriage partners. Such clients must learn to develop thought, feeling, and behavioral patterns which facilitate their taking much more responsibility for their own marital happiness and their own contribution to the attainment of that happiness.

Many clients must be assisted by marriage counselors to recognize that personal, relationship, and social (environmental) change will inevitably occur. This fact means that clients must learn to be flexible and must be willing to negotiate with their partners new interpersonal arrangements which take such changes into account. Most changes cannot be prevented or resisted; therefore, individuals and couples must learn to accommodate to change. Individuals and couples can learn to accommodate to change by altering the structure and functioning of their relationships in productive and satisfying ways.¹

¹Candyce S. Russell, et al., "Intervention Strategies: Predicting Family Therapy Outcome," Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 10, No. 3 (1984), 249.

Both the literature and the interviews with marriage counselors highlight the fact that marriage is a multi-dimensional role relationship. Each partner has a set of role expectations for the other and each has a conception of what their partner expects from them and what they expect themselves to do as a participant in a relationship.

One of the major bases for marital distress and, hence, one of the foci of marital counseling is insuring that the marital partners attain a measure of role clarification. A lack of either clarity or congruence or both can provide a basis for serious marital distress.¹ Many of the process or skill oriented counselors who were interviewed indicated that commonly one of their goals was to function as a guide who helped couples attain an acceptable level of role clarification.

Many of those interviewed expressed their belief that conflict per se was not a relationship problem nor was the elimination of conflict one of the criteria for a successful counseling experience. Conflict, they felt, was normal in any relationship. The problem is perceived as being the lack of adequate conflict resolution skills on the part of one or

¹Suzanne Vaughan and Anne S. Macke, "Marital Disruption Among Professional Women: The Timing of Career and Family Events," Social Problems, 31, No. 3 (1984), 273-84.

both partners in a marriage.¹ Conflict is seen as indicative of unmet needs (sometimes unmet because they are unexpressed to marital role partners), value disagreements, lack of role clarification, etc.

Many couples must be taught to communicate as a technique for conflict resolution. They must be taught how to clarify and negotiate the resolution of issues without personally developing or engendering in others negative affect. Conflict resolution skills, once learned, are seen as providing a basis for being functionally responsive to subsequent changes in self, the partner, or the sociocultural environment.

The seventh pattern identified by those counselors who were interviewed is forgiveness. This is perceived as the ability and the willingness of each of the marital partners to forgive self and others for (real or imagined) "slings and arrows." Many counselors were convinced that forgiveness was either a pre-condition or a concomitant of a successful counseling experience. A lack of forgiveness, they seemed to feel, creates an inability to be intimate, to communicate, to negotiate, or to change.

The analysis of the interviews, especially those with the process oriented counselors, led the author to the con-

¹Israel W. Charny, "Why Are So Many (If Not Really All) People and Families Disturbed," Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 6, No. 1 (1980), 37-47.

clusion that most or all of these seven patterns are components of the success model of marriage counseling. Those patterns appear to be interrelated to one another. One might assert, for example, that forgiveness must precede communication and communication must precede role clarification.

Some clients need little assistance, being lacking perhaps in only a few patterns. Others may be lacking in most or all of the patterns and thus present to a marriage counselor a formidable challenge indeed.

Earlier, a distinction was drawn by the author between problem and process oriented marriage counselors. It is the author's belief, however, based on the total content, recorded and unrecorded, of the interviews with all twenty-seven of the persons interviewed, that problem oriented marriage counselors probably believe that identified marital problems cannot be ameliorated unless there is a clear and positive sense of self, a desire and an ability to communicate, an ability to know and utilize conflict resolution skills, etc. on the part of both partners in a distressed marriage. Their initial focus, perhaps their primary focus, however, in the professional practice of marriage counseling is to get the marital partners to identify presenting and underlying problems clearly and to focus time and energy on resolving those and subsequently identified problems.

Correlates of Success

The marriage counselors interviewed were asked to identify client characteristics they believed to be associated with the likelihood of success in the marriage counseling experience. The author's content analysis of the interview material does not reveal any marked distinctions between the characteristics identified by process and problem oriented marriage counselors. There are, however, some client characteristics about which there is some disagreement among the counselors with respect to whether or not they enhance the likelihood of success in the marriage counseling experience.

Not all of the twenty-seven counselors who were interviewed mentioned chronicity of the presenting or subsequently delineated problems as being a client characteristic related to the likelihood of success or failure. Among those who did, however, there was significant disagreement.

Some felt that if a marital problem had been manifest for a long period of time, it was likely that there had developed a residue of anger and resentment that would make successful marriage counseling very difficult. Others believed that chronicity either was not a significant factor at all or that chronicity with respect to a marital problem or problems was indicative of the fact that the couple had

the capacity for working out interpersonal arrangements that could accommodate significant problems.¹

There was also disagreement with respect to the degree to which religiosity of clients contributed to the likelihood of success in marriage counseling. Again, not all of those who were interviewed even mentioned religiosity as a relevant client characteristic.

Among those who did mention religiosity, there were some who felt that commitment to a coherent set of spiritual or religious values made a positive contribution to the counseling experience. Others indicated that they felt the presence or absence of spiritual or religious values on the part of clients was irrelevant to the success or failure of the counseling experience. Among those who did focus on religiosity as a relevant characteristic, there was substantial agreement that religious fundamentalism, which seemed to be associated with rigidity of personality, and, hence, resistance to change, was negatively associated with success in the marriage counseling experience.²

¹Gurman and Kniskern, p. 865, concluded from their literature review that chronicity and severity of marital problems are negatively associated with success in marriage counseling. The author's data dealt only with chronicity.

²The author could find no literature which dealt with this client characteristic as it relates to marriage counseling outcomes. However, there appears to be some evidence that religiosity and marital satisfaction and stability are positively associated. See Howard M. Bahr and Bruce A. Chadwick, "Religion and Family in Middletown, U.S.A.," Journal

The third client characteristic on which there was disagreement among those counselors who mentioned it was the presence of minor children in the client couple's family system. Some counselors believed that the presence or absence of children had no influence at all on the outcome of the marriage counseling experience. Others felt that the presence of children was positively associated with outcome and still others felt the presence of children was negatively associated with outcome.

Those who saw children as contributing to the likelihood of a successful marriage counseling experience felt that the presence of the children would strengthen the resolve of the clients to maintain the marital relationship. A number of those who felt that children were likely to be associated with an unsuccessful marriage counseling experience commented about the special difficulties posed by children in blended families.¹

of Marriage and the Family, 47, No. 2 (1985), 407-14. The author located one research study that demonstrates that fundamentalist Protestants have higher separation and divorce rates than either other Protestants or Catholics. See S. Kenneth Chi and Sharon K. Houseknecht, "Protestant Fundamentalism and Marital Success: A Comparative Approach," Sociology and Social Research, 69, No. 3 (1985), 351-75.

²The author could find no literature relevant to the relationship between the presence of minor children and marriage counseling outcomes. There is evidence, however, that the presence of minor children lowers the marital satisfaction of parents. See Norval D. Glenn and Sara McLanahan, "Children and Marital Happiness: A Further Specification of the Relationship," Journal of Marriage and the Family, 44, No.1 (1982) 63-72.

A number of client characteristics were mentioned frequently as being positively associated with the likelihood of success in the marriage counseling experience. Among the most frequently mentioned characteristics was that clients have a clear sense of an individuated self and that clients have the ability to be introspective about that sense of self. The counselors appear to believe that a client who can see himself as a person separate from, but involved in, a marital relationship has a better likelihood of success than one who has no sense of individuality, no sense of uniqueness as a person.

Clients who lack that sense of individuated self must usually be taught to recognize it or acquire it if the counseling is to be successful. Additionally, the clients must have or develop the capacity to evaluate their own self thoroughly and honestly in response to self scrutiny and the scrutiny of others.

Empathy was another frequently cited client characteristic associated with the likelihood of success of the marriage counseling experience. Empathy was essentially seen, by those who mentioned it, as the ability of a client to experience the thoughts and feelings of a marital partner, as if one was that person. The successful client was seen as one who could take and experience and react to the role of the other.

The ability to recognize and accept the social and psychological differences between one's self and one's partner was seen by a number of counselors as being a client characteristic that enhanced the likelihood of success. A number of marriage counselors called that characteristic flexibility. Flexible clients were those who were also capable of dealing with frustration and ambiguity.

Many of those interviewed suggested that the likelihood of success in the counseling experience is enhanced if the client is intelligent, educated, and success oriented. Such persons, it was argued, are used to delineating and dealing with problems. They tend to be proactive rather than reactive. Such persons are likely to enter counseling with the expectation that problems, once delineated, can be solved. In addition, such clients tend to have the verbal and conceptual skills that are needed for success in the counseling experience.

The existence of individual and shared support systems, including families of origin, was also frequently cited as contributing to the likelihood of success of the marriage counseling experience. Couples that have only or primarily the partner in the relationship as a source of catharsis and response are more at risk maritally and have a lower probability of success in the counseling experience according to a number of the counselors interviewed.

A number of those interviewed stated that the absence of third party involvement was associated with a higher probability of counseling success. Involvement of one or both of the clients in a love relationship with a third party confounds the counseling relationship by reducing the motivation of one or both of the clients to enter into the negotiation and change required for success in counseling since there is, in the third party relationship, the promise that needs and desires will be fulfilled elsewhere.

The absence of psychopathologies, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, or psychosis, was frequently mentioned as a factor contributing to the likelihood of success in the marriage counseling experience. Those who discussed that client characteristic argued that the presence of a psychopathology made it very difficult for clients to self-disclose, to "own" their own problems, to accept their own responsibility for their contribution to a relationship, and to negotiate change in self and partner.

Some counselors did see the possibility of stabilizing a distressed marital relationship while the client afflicted with a psychopathology worked individually with the counselor, another counselor, or a substance abuse clinic. Most saw little possibility of enriching a marital relationship, however, while one or both of the clients was afflicted with a psychopathology.

Several counselors mentioned length of marriage as a factor positively associated with success in the marriage counseling experience. They argued that length of marriage was an indicator of the fact that couples could at least reach an accommodation. They also thought that those married for a long period of time would be motivated to try to maintain the relationship to which they had committed so much time and energy. The literature does suggest also that there is a positive relationship between length of time married and success in the counseling experience.¹

Pain and motivation are the final client characteristics that were identified by those who were interviewed as being positively associated with success in marriage counseling. Clients who enter marriage counseling experiencing significant emotional pain are usually seeking relief from that pain and, hence, are likely to be motivated to engage in the activities that are required to provide a basis for a successful counseling experience. Those activities, as previously mentioned, include being willing to disclose one's needs, fears, and anxieties. They also include a willingness to forgive and forget the past. The client must also be motivated enough by pain to engage in negotiation and personal change as well as the efforts required to deal with personal psychopathologies. Pain was mentioned by a number

¹Gurman and Kniskern, p. 876.

of those interviewed as an important motivating force that encourages clients to work at the counseling experience and the marriage.

A number of those who mentioned pain as a positive client characteristic added a caveat, however. If the client has already experienced too much pain or is then experiencing too much pain, he or she may have already withdrawn emotionally from the relationship or the client may be on the verge of doing so. Once a client has withdrawn from the marital relationship, even if they enter into counseling (perhaps, for example, to help get their partner ready for a separation), the likelihood of success in the counseling experience is quite low.

A number of discrete but probably interrelated client characteristics were mentioned by those interviewed by the author as contributing to the likelihood of success in the marriage counseling experience. While the matter was not formally discussed with most of the marriage counselors, it seems reasonable to assume that the more positive and the less negative characteristics a client brings to the counseling experience, the higher is the probability of success. It also seems reasonable to assert that if both clients, as opposed to only one of the married couple, bring most of the positive and few of the negative client characteristics to the counseling experience, the likelihood of success is even greater.

Almost all marital therapy is done conjointly, with both of the marital partners being involved with the same counselor at the same time. That does not insure that both partners are equally motivated or equally involved. It is possible for one or both of the partners to simulate motivation and, even, involvement. If such a situation occurs, it is the equivalent of doing marriage counseling with only one partner at best and most of the research suggests that individual therapy for marital problems is essentially ineffective.¹

Definition of Failure

The problem oriented marriage counselors interviewed by the author defined failure essentially as the condition that exists when the clients either do not attain the goals which were delineated early in the counseling experience or believe they have not attained those goals. Process or skill oriented counselors defined a failed marriage counseling experience as one which does not culminate in learning or releasing already extant intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and characteristics.

Problem oriented marriage counselors would, for example, define failure as occurring when the clients are no more satisfied with the nature of their sex life, if that was the major problem delineated earlier in the counseling experience,

¹Gurman and Kniskern, p. 883.

than when they began the counseling experience. Process oriented counselors, on the other hand, would specify the failure of the clients to attain or release certain intrapersonal or interpersonal skills and characteristics that facilitate the attainment of a more satisfactory sex life as the criteria for failure of the marriage counseling experience.

Both problem and process oriented counselors agreed that failure has occurred when one or both clients simply discontinue marriage counseling as a result of denial that there are, in fact, significant problems to be dealt with or because of fear of self-disclosure. There may be other reasons for discontinuance (e.g., lack of adequate funds for private counseling), but those listed above were the ones most often mentioned by those interviewed.

As previously mentioned, process oriented marriage counselors identified a number of interpersonal and intrapersonal characteristics that define failure for them. Among the most prominent of those mentioned was when one or both clients continue to attribute to someone else the responsibility for the failure of the relationship. Failure will occur in the counseling experience unless both partners in the relationship are willing to accept responsibility for the success or failure of that relationship.

Failure was also defined as the inability or unwillingness of one or both clients to disengage from a dysfunctional

relationship sufficiently to be introspective about self and to examine the relationship from a new and more functional perspective. In effect, the client must differentiate self from a relationship in order to understand the relationship and his or her participation in it.

Failure to learn to communicate is also a commonly mentioned criterion for asserting that the marriage counseling experience has been a failure. Marriage partners can neither send nor receive information about marital concerns, needs, or desires unless they can learn or release communication skills. Many of those interviewed indicated that it is necessary to devote a great deal of counseling time to teaching, or removing impediments to the use of, communication skills.

The inability or unwillingness of clients to identify their interpersonal options (including separation or divorce) and to choose from among them is seen as failure by a number of those interviewed. They felt that a failed marriage counseling experience was one, which for any reason, leaves the couple mired in the presenting or real problems, unable or unwilling to see and exercise their options.

The inability of the clients to perceive the differences between real and presenting problems, if such differences exist, was seen by some of those interviewed as another criterion for failure of the counseling experience. The pre-

senting problem is frequently a symptom of the real intrapersonal or interpersonal dysfunction. The failed counseling experience is one that does not ultimately lead the clients to explore the distinction and act with respect to the real causes of marital dysfunction.

An inability or unwillingness on the part of one or both clients to alter existing perceptions of the marital partner is seen by some of the marriage counselors as yet another criterion of failure. Primarily that characteristic takes the form of negative evaluations of the differences between what the marital partner is and what one would like the partner to be. Acceptance, rather than evaluation, of differences is one of the goals of marriage counseling and the failure to attain that goal is identified by some of those interviewed as a component of a failed counseling experience.

A lack of significant reduction in client anger or depression was also identified as a characteristic of a failed marriage counseling experience. Anger and depression are seen as impediments to communication and to the kind of introspection that makes the restructuring of an interpersonal relationship possible.

It seems likely that continuing anger or depression is a concomitant of a final component of the definitions of failure offered by those who were interviewed, the failure

of the couple to reignite intimacy. The reignition of intimacy is, in the ideal case, likely to provide an important basis for the continuation of a marriage. But even couples that decide to separate and divorce can, and often do, leave the counseling experience with a level of intimacy they did not have when they began the counseling experience.

It should be noted, as with definitions of success, that those interviewed by the author did not define failure of the marriage counseling experience as being when a couple or one partner decides upon separation or divorce. Failure is defined in other terms entirely; either as the failure or perceived failure to attain specific counseling goals or the failure on the part of clients either to learn or release important intrapersonal or interpersonal skills or characteristics.

Correlates of Failure

The existence of a serious psychopathology was the most frequently mentioned client characteristic predisposing to failure in the counseling experience. The psychopathology, whether substance abuse or psychosis, tends to render a client generally incapable of communicating functionally and consistently with either a marriage partner or a marriage counselor. The psychopathology does not guarantee failure, but it certainly makes success very problematic unless it is ameliorated promptly.

Clients who do not have a relatively clear sense of self or who lack self-esteem are also likely candidates for failure in the marriage counseling experience according to a number of those interviewed. Such persons also tend to have a sense of self that is not differentiated from the marital relationship or the larger interactional and socio-cultural environments.

Narcissism, a high degree of self-orientation and self-admiration, is another characteristic that was frequently mentioned as increasing the likelihood of a failed marriage counseling experience. Such clients tend to lack the ability to "take the role" of their marital partner (or others, for that matter) and they tend to be devoid of empathy. Narcissistic persons also tend to be very wary of self-disclosure and to have great reluctance to engage in self-evaluation.

Clients who lack a coherent value system were also identified as those whose success in the marriage counseling experience is problematic. While the matter was not discussed in any detail with those interviewed, the author infers that the counselors were suggesting that those who lack a coherent and stable value system lack a basis for evaluating and selecting appropriate patterns of thought, feelings, and behaviors.

Clients who are significantly non-homogeneous with respect to a number of significant characteristics were iden-

tified as among those for whom success in the counseling experience is problematic. Such characteristics as social class, age, and values were among those mentioned by the counselors as being salient. Also, it is not uncommon for significantly non-homogeneous marriage partners to have married for inappropriate reasons such as loneliness, physical or sexual attraction, and pregnancy.

Those who are impatient with the marriage counseling process, those, in effect, who want instant solutions to complex intrapersonal or interpersonal problems, were also identified as poor candidates for successful counseling. Such persons are usually unable or unwilling to invest the time and energy required to delineate and work on the serious problems that brought them to the marriage counselor's office in the first place.

A number of clients enter marriage counseling after they have separated, filed for divorce, or divided their material assets. Likewise, some are already involved with third parties. Clearly, such persons are among the best candidates for failure and were so identified by a number of those who were interviewed.

Clients who are in the throes of some severe social dislocation, such as loss of employment or the terminal illness of a loved one, have substantial difficulty playing the role of client in a productive manner. Such persons are

frequently so stressed that they lack the clarity of thought or the disciplined ability to invest in the counseling experience.

Some clients have extremely rigid personalities and are not amenable to the growth that is essential to renegotiate and restructure dysfunctional marital relationships. Sometimes they insist on retaining older, perhaps family transmitted, definitions of marital structure and functioning that simply are inappropriate for contemporary times. Marriage counselors frequently identified those with rigid personalities as high risk clients.

Clients who lack intelligence or education, given the verbal and conceptual content of much marriage counseling, tend to be among the less successful clients. Likewise, persons who are failures in other significant aspects of life, such as employment, are less likely than others to be successful as clients according to some of those who were interviewed.

Many clients who come out of dysfunctional families of origin tend to lack the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and characteristics necessary to make adequate marital partners and successful clients. Similarly, those who have already had untreated marital failure and who are trying to blend families with minor, resident children are more likely than their counterparts to be unsuccessful clients.

Finally, several of those marriage counselors who were interviewed suggested that poor rapport between the marriage counselor and the clients can significantly decrease the likelihood of successful marriage counseling. That lack of rapport, whether based on significant differences in age, social class, values, or some unknown factor, must be quickly acknowledged and resolved or the clients should be referred to another counselor with whom they are more likely to be able to establish rapport.

The marriage counselors who were interviewed identified a number of client characteristics that they believe, on the basis of their clinical experience, are likely to increase the risk of failure in the marriage counseling experience. The author infers from their comments that the effects of those factors are relative and cumulative rather than absolute and discrete. That is, a single factor, such as lack of homogeneity on some significant social variable does not insure a failed marriage counseling experience any more than it insures the failure of a marriage. Client characteristics have differing but unspecified, at this time, values, and the presence of a number of client characteristics rather than one or two is more likely to make the success of the marriage counseling experience more problematic.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

As late as 1948 sociologist John Cuber could write that "marriage counseling is an 'emerging profession' about which, unfortunately, the public has had all too little reliable information."¹ The research conducted for this report supports the notion that marriage counseling is now a "maturing profession" about which the public has much more information.

Even so, only a fraction of those who could and should utilize marriage counseling to reduce marital stress, do so. That is unfortunate, because the "success rate" for clients of private and agency marriage counseling combined is a reported 64 percent nationally.

The twenty-seven private practice marriage counselors recently interviewed by the author reported an average success rate of 76 percent. It may very well be that nationally the success rate among private practice marriage counselors is higher than it is among those who practice in social service agencies because of differences in client characteristics.

Among the marriage counselors interviewed for this research study, definitions of success and failure in marriage

¹John F. Cuber, Marriage Counseling Practice (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948), p. vii.

counseling took two general forms. One form of definition focused primarily on whether or not the clients appear to have resolved most or all of the marital problems which were delineated early in the marriage counseling experience.

The other form of definition of success and failure focused on whether or not the clients were able to release or acquire most or all of a number of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and characteristics. The skills and characteristics identified by the marriage counselors who participated in this research study were: clarity of self and self-esteem, communication, acceptance of responsibility, adaptation to change, role clarification, conflict resolution, and forgiveness. Those components of success in marriage counseling were thought to be interrelated in complex but explicable ways.

There was substantial agreement among those interviewed by the author that a successful marriage counseling experience does not preclude a divorce on the part of the clients if that was perceived as the best of the interpersonal options delineated by them. Likewise, a couple that avoids separation or divorce and continues to live together in a dysfunction manner was perceived by those interviewed as having had a failed marriage counseling experience.

The marriage counselors who participated in this study identified a number of client characteristics which they believed, on the basis of extensive clinical experience,

contributed to success and failure in marriage counseling. Among the identified client characteristics were: individuation of self, empathy, flexibility, intelligence, support systems, value systems, third-party involvement, psychopathology, social traumas, length of marriage, patience, motivation, and homogeneity. In general, clients were most likely to have a successful marriage counseling experience if they had an individuated sense of self, were empathic, were flexible, were intelligent, were patient, were involved in one or more support systems, were not involved in an intimate relationship with a third-party, were free of psychopathologies, had been married for a long time, were motivated, had coherent value systems, were free of significant social traumas, and were relatively homogeneous with the marital partner.

The marriage counselors who were interviewed did not agree on the relevance of certain client characteristics to success and failure in marriage counseling. Among the client characteristics about which there was disagreement were chronicity of marital problems, religiosity, and the presence or absence of minor children.

It is likely that the majority of those who enter marriage counseling receive and perceive some immediate reduction in both intrapersonal and interpersonal distress because most of those who start the counseling experience finish it. The twenty-seven marriage counselors interviewed by the

author reported that an average of 73 percent of those who had an initial marriage counseling session completed the counseling experience. As previously reported, 76 percent of those who completed the marriage counseling experience were defined as successful by those marriage counselors who participated in this study.

The present research was not designed to investigate why some clients who start marriage counseling do not complete the experience. The author plans further research to explore that matter. Likewise, the present research was not designed to discover why some maritally distressed persons undertake marriage counseling but others do not. That important matter will also be explored in a future, planned research project.

It is clear from the present research that while the degree of agreement is not absolute, there is substantial agreement among those in the private practice of marriage counseling on definitions of success and failure in marriage counseling and on client characteristics which seem to predispose to success and failure.

In a future research project, the author intends to interview a sample of clients who have experienced marital counseling to determine their definitions of success and failure and to determine whether or not there is agreement among those clients with respect to their definitions. The author also plans to measure the degree of agreement or disagreement between counselor and client definitions of

success and failure in the marriage counseling experience. Finally, the author plans to attempt to determine what actual client characteristics seem to be correlated with client perceived success and failure of the marriage counseling experience.

It is reasonable to conclude, on the basis of the evidence presented in this report, that marriage is a distressed social arrangement in contemporary American society. It is also clear that it is possible, through marriage counseling, to reduce that distress. The promise of marriage counseling was expressed almost thirty years ago as follows:

Marriage counseling is indeed an expression of our times! More and more individuals and families who might perhaps be able to work out their adjustments to their environment in a less complex society, find the stress and strains of modern living too intense, too complicated, and too demanding for them. They do not know how to use their potential inner strengths and resources to be able to cope adequately with the conflicting and competitive demands for their attention and energies. Nor do they have the knowledge and experience needed for an objective analysis of the disturbing elements, an evaluation of the destructive and constructive factors at work, and a marshalling of the positive forces for solving the problem or problems which face them. The individuals involved feel a deep need, therefore, to seek the aid of professionally skilled outsiders, uninvolved and more "objective" persons for help in their difficulties.¹

That promise is in the process of being realized, but uncounted millions of couples are not sharing in that realization. It is hoped that research, such as that undertaken

¹Emily H. Mudd, et al., eds., Marriage Counseling: A Casebook (New York: Association Press, 1958), p. 28.

by the author, will help facilitate the fuller realization of the promise of the profession of marriage counseling.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

DRAKE UNIVERSITY

DES MOINES, IOWA 50311

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

I am conducting a research project which is focused in the area of marriage counseling. The primary, non-literary, source of data for the research will be obtained from interviews with marriage counselors and marriage counseling clients. The interviews will primarily explore counselor and client definitions of success - failure of the counseling experience and client pathways to counseling.

The identities of all counselors and clients interviewed will remain confidential. The data obtained from the interviews and the results of the research will be handled in a manner which will insure confidentiality.

I would very much appreciate having the opportunity to include you among the counselors I interview and will soon call you to schedule a thirty minute interviewing appointment if you are willing to do so. If you prefer, you may call my office at Drake University (271-2745 from 8:00 a.m. to noon and from 1:00 to 4:30 p.m.) and leave a message if I am not in or you may call me at home (day or night) at 223-5499.

I am Professor and Chairperson of Sociology at Drake University and have been studying in the area of marriage counseling for some time. I will, in fact, complete all requirements for the M.S. in Counseling in a few months.

I hope you will be able and willing to participate in this research project.

Sincerely,

Kenneth E. Miller

KEM/ms

Appendix B

COUNSELOR INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. What client characteristics seem to contribute most to the likelihood of failure of the counseling experience?
2. What client characteristics seem to contribute most to the likelihood of success of the counseling experience?
3. How do you define success in marriage counseling?
4. What percentage of your clients achieve a successful counseling experience?
5. What percentage of your clients believe they have had a successful counseling experience?
6. How do you define failure in marriage counseling?
7. How do you decide when it is time to terminate marriage counseling?
8. What percentage of your clients continue in counseling long enough to at least provide a basis for a successful experience?
9. Do you have a particular theoretical orientation that guides the majority of your marriage counseling?